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ABSTRACT

This paper is the work of an international student studying within the School of Art Education at the University of New South Wales, Sydney (Australia), who has undertaken doctoral research on the teaching and learning experiences of international Asian graphic design students within the setting of an overseas university. It identifies the nature of the students' cultural transition and the particular difficulties and dilemmas encountered. The paper considers the researcher's own experiences while teaching "outside her culture" at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, some years before. It finds that underpinning the way educators communicate in design is the use of coding systems and semiotics and that, to function in Malaysia, new systems were needed. The researcher/teacher contends that the experience of teaching in Malaysia caused her to re-evaluate her teaching strategies and psychology and her previously held perceptions of her subject. (BT)

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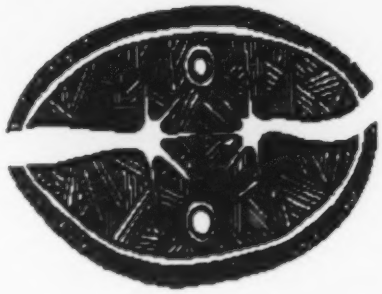

InSEA

A BRITISH GRAPHIC DESIGNER TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Louise McWhinnie

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I am currently an international student studying within The School of Art Education at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. The doctoral research that I am undertaking concerns culture and the study of graphic design and visual communication by international Asian students within the context of Australian universities. I am also a lecturer in Visual Communication at The University of Technology, Sydney.

The research I am presently undertaking has grown out of my own experiences as a university course director, establishing a British university graphic design course and School of Art and Design in a new Malaysian college. Despite a number of years as both a graphic designer and lecturer, at times I found the experience of working in a new culture, a new environment, and with students from a different background to my own, difficult. In terms of my subject, I found myself bereft of all of the familiar reference points that I had employed in my previous years of teaching, they just weren't relevant to the students' culture or experiences. My research has come about as a result of this. If I could experience difficulties adapting my teaching, leading me to re-evaluate my understanding of my subject area: then what particular difficulties and dilemmas would a young international student from Asia face, when studying a culturally based subject in a different cultural setting.

My research focuses specifically on the teaching and learning experiences of international Asian graphic design students within the setting of an overseas university; identifying the nature of the students' cultural transition and the particular difficulties and dilemmas encountered in the study of this subject. This exploration concerns subject specific difficulties and dilemmas, how these difficulties are identified and resolved by students and staff, why these dilemmas exist and how they relate to the clash between the students' inherent cultural framework and a culturally based subject such as graphic design, as taught and studied in a country not of the students' cultural background. The study considers student issues and concerns with specific reference to the nature of the subject of graphic design. It particularly references how the students' pre-university educational backgrounds and experiences have prepared them for degree study in this subject, how their inherent cultural characteristics influence, guide and affect their study of the subject, and how their lecturers' awareness or lack of awareness of their culture impacts upon their work. It is intended that this research will provide the foundation for a greater understanding of the subject specific issues and concerns of international students studying in overseas universities. Also, that it will provide an opportunity for students and staff to gain an increased awareness of the cultural factors that influence and indeed determine the way in which designers design and create. Underpinning the study are the writings of Bourdieu and his strategic concepts of culture and 'habitus'.

This paper however is intended to be a purely experiential one. I hope it will give at least a small insight into my experiences, and why this paper is titled 'A British Graphic Designer *Teaching and Learning* in South-East Asia.' In 1995 whilst working as the course leader of a tertiary graphic design course in the UK, an unusual educational position was advertised in a national newspaper. I applied for the job, never thinking that I would be considered. Having been short-listed and endured two days of interviews though, I was offered the post of Course Director of graphic design for a London university, seconded to Malaysia. After receiving the phone

call, euphoria set in, quickly replaced by reality, closely followed by panic. I only had two months in which to hand in my notice, finish my job, get a passport, apply for a work permit, find a home for the cats, pack up the flat and most importantly of all, try to persuade my partner to give up his job in London and come with me. Somehow all of this was achieved and in August 1995 we flew to Kuala Lumpur. So began my two and a half years secondment to Malaysia.

Arriving in Kuala Lumpur, we were met off the plane and driven directly into the college. As we sat in reception waiting to be met, we were very aware of how dirty, hot & smelly we must appear after a 14-hour overnight flight: not one of my greatest entrances into a new job! Within an hour of getting off the plane, we were sitting in the house that would be our home for the next two and a half years. Four bedrooms, marble floors, huge ceiling fans, a maid's room off the kitchen: these were not the features that were to be found in the one bedroom London flat that we had left less than twenty four hours before. Walking into the Malaysian College on my first day, I realized that I was the only western woman in the college. Until that moment it hadn't struck me that being the only person with pale skin, blue eyes and fair hair was going to make me stand out. That probably was my first realization that things were going to be different. Obviously sneaking out between classes for a surreptitious cigarette was going to be difficult without being noticed.

The main dilemma that I had to face however was that I was to teach a culturally based subject in a culture that I had no knowledge of and in a country of which I had little understanding. If this shows me to be fairly naïve, then in retrospect I would probably agree. I hadn't considered how different in many ways it would be from lecturing in the UK. I also seriously underestimated how my experiences would alter my perception of not just the subject of graphic design but also my teaching of it.

What makes graphic design different from most other design subjects and disciplines is that its primary function is the communication of an idea. Unlike other university design subjects such as product design, architecture or interior design, graphic design is rarely designed to last. It doesn't create an object. Its primary function is communication and is often designed to be as transitory as the latest consumerist fad or as throwaway as the latest club flyer. As such, graphic design is often described as a fluid language; much as culture is fluid. If what determines graphic design is its context and how its read, then design cannot truly be described as an international language because it is designed for specific cultures and contexts by designers usually of that culture, whether that culture be national, ethnic, youth culture or even sub-cultural. My educational training and design practice up until this point had been solely within a European context.

As a somewhat 'untraditional' university discipline, graphic design by its nature is a very broad, fluid and flexible subject. Unlike many other university subjects, it contains few definites: there are no absolute rights or wrongs. Students' personal understanding, definition and structuring of the subject comes about through the flexibility and creativity of experiential studio learning. If graphic design is as is often said, is a language, then learning it is done by living and speaking the language everyday, not by learning the language from a textbook. In many ways this is an element of difficulty for students studying outside of their culture or learning with and from lecturers without knowledge of their culture. Unsure of themselves, students seek rules and structures to work by in order to gain understanding. Graphic design offers few rules except in the underpinning of the subject through Bauhausian convention and technicalities such as typography and the use of technology. Graphic design is a culturally based subject. Just as we are all finely ingrained in habitus, so too by its nature is graphic design. This very fluid nature of the subject is what makes it to a certain extent, a difficult subject to teach outside of one's culture.

My lecturing experience up until this stage had been totally within the UK. My teaching was pitched at a certain level of student experience that was similar to my own. I *assumed* the students had similar experiences to my own because they had usually studied within a school curriculum and system that I too had studied in. They were studying a degree course that I too had studied ten years before. I could therefore *assume* that I had at least a general shared framework of reference. I could *assume* a great deal of the students: what they had studied at school, the sort of films they'd have seen, the sorts of TV they had watched all of their lives, the music they listened to, the images they saw all around them in magazines, newspapers and advertising. As a culturally based subject, graphic design relies on this cultural knowledge, experience and context as the basis of its communication. In retrospect, to a great extent, my lecturing within the UK was based on *assumed* knowledge and experience and as such my lecturing and studio teaching of the subject was a reaffirmation of the students' and my cultural framework. When taken out of my cultural 'comfort zone' however, all of my reference points were lost. They weren't relevant. In Malaysia the students and I had little shared experience and little common cultural ground. If my previous teaching was a 'reaffirmation', then teaching outside of my culture was to a great extent a 're-evaluation'; a re-evaluation not just for me, but for the students as well. As I would challenge their perceptions, so they would challenge mine.

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Underpinning the way that we communicate in design is our use of coding systems and semiotics. As semiotics is generally perceived to be determined by cultural convention, then in order to teach this area successfully to the students, I would have to learn new coding systems. For example, in western society the number thirteen is considered unlucky. In Malaysia the number four is unlucky because the word sounds the same as the word for death. It took me a few weeks to realize that this was why every time I went up and down in the lift, we never stopped on the fourth floor, or in fact why there was no button for the fourth floor: there was no fourth floor! After a year in Malaysia, my partner and I decided to return briefly to Britain in order to get married. My colleges' congratulations quickly turned to horror when I was asked the date of our wedding: the fourth of September at four o'clock. This was perceived as not just unlucky, but tantamount to asking for the marriage to go horribly wrong.

Designing in Britain, I was accustomed to being able to communicate such things as moods, emotions and even times of the year through the the cultural conventions of the recognized coding systems that use colour. Without the use of words or explanation I could suggest winter with the colour white, or autumn with brown or orange This could not be the case in Malaysia, because apart from it being ridiculous to represent winter in a tropical country with the colour white, there really were no seasons: just monsoon season and dry season. Both were very much the same in terms of colour representation: One season was wet, one wasn't. In Britain the colour red is conventionally perceived to represent love, lust or the even the devil. But in Malaysia red is used to signify money, due to its traditional use for the ang pow, or envelopes, which are used to distribute money to children and unmarried adults at Chinese New Year. In Malaysia white as well as black can represent death and considerable amounts of superstition and unease surrounds the wearing of the colour black. I soon discovered that if I wanted to shorten certain college management meetings, the easiest way to do this was by wearing black from head to foot.

In terms of teaching and social interaction I became the 'Constant Improviser'. As Bourdieu says "the agent is a constant improviser in an ambiguous and partially understood environment." I was in a system that was foreign to me and I was foreign to the students, somehow we had to find common ground, but that could not happen immediately: it would take work on both sides. One of my first attempts towards understanding and communicating with the students was very simple: I started to read and subscribe to the local daily newspapers. I also went straight out and bought a television. These were very simple ways of tapping into the immediate problems of both cultural adjustment and creating within myself an awareness of the country's and the students' culture. Watching the TV each night also at least provided me with an immediate subject to discuss with the students the next day at college.

In teaching terms there were great differences between my previous experiences of teaching and the environment that I now found myself in. My first language is English; however, English was the second or even third language of the students, as most would speak Malay, Mandarin, Cantonese or possibly even other languages or dialects at home. Having worked in London for a number of years, I tended to speak quickly and use a shortened or colloquial way of expressing myself, added to which design and the design profession has a terminology and language all of its own which I employed in my teaching. I quickly learnt to adapt my language to a pace and level that could be easily understood. Indeed, by the time I left Malaysia my pattern of speech had in fact changed as I had adapted to the students' way of speaking English and the patterns in which they combined words. Within a lecture or tutorial situation in Britain I was used to a student being fairly vocal if they didn't understand what I was saying. This was not the case in Malaysia. Culturally the students would not ask me to re-explain a point that had not been fully grasped. Over a period of time though I learnt to become very aware of the body language of the students. If I sensed that a point might not been fully understood, I wouldn't draw attention to this as it would cause 'loss of face' for the particular student, a situation that culturally would be perceived as a public humiliation. I learnt to pick up on the signals and just rephrase what I had said to allow it to be understood. In the early stages of my teaching in Malaysia, I couldn't understand why the students didn't interact with me when I tried to create a forum for discussion. Becoming more attuned to the local social customs, I became aware that it was perceived that I was there to teach and the students were there to listen. This was very different to lecturing within the UK. The Malaysian students' previous educational experiences had not included open discussion with teachers, as Malay schooling tends to be more formal in approach to that of the UK. This situation improved with time however as I became more used to the students and the students became more used to me. I also became more used to adapting my teaching strategies for emergent situations. For example, the course document required that I teach about the impact of the Industrial Revolution on society, economics and design. As most of the students had naturally not been taught European history at school, this seemed to be a somewhat difficult task. I decided however to put the subject into context, and compared the impact of the industrial revolution in Europe to the present industrial and economic growth in Malaysia in it's push towards recognition as a first world nation and the social, economic and hence manufacturing and design impact that this was having upon the country and region. I learnt that I could not necessarily base my teaching upon my

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own background or rely upon my previous experiences: I had to watch, listen and learn in order to make my teaching effective and rewarding for both the students and myself.

After two and a half years, I reached my final day in Malaysia. On the day that my work permit expired I took a first year seminar in the morning and the rest of the day was spent in the design studios saying farewell to the students. My husband and I were then driven straight from work to the airport. Unbeknown to us, the students had arranged a convoy. Driving along the freeway to the airport, we found ourselves surrounded by a convoy of escorting students in cars, beeping horns and waving banners. After we'd said our good byes, we walked towards the desk to the departure lounge. Behind was a hoard of screaming students. As we got to the desk, the officials seeing and hearing the commotion asked us if we were pop stars. I said "no I'm a lecturer, and those are my students". My husband has never forgiven me for this. He claims I should have said yes, as we would have been upgraded to business class or at least got into the VIP departure lounge.

The experience of teaching in Malaysia caused me not just to re-evaluate my teaching strategies and psychology; it also caused me to re-evaluate my previously held perceptions of my subject. These experiences I have brought with me to my lecturing and teaching in Australia, making me question in much more depth, what I do and how I do it. That is why this paper's title includes the words *'Teaching and Learning.'* I went to Malaysia to teach. In retrospect, I think I learnt as much as I taught.

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